

After three years as a houseparent at a group home for girls, **Alex Macias** was unprepared for the transformation in her own life.

# EXPOSED



I drove to work with the windows down listening to some old Radiohead song. It was my second to last day of work. Well actually, it was my second to last night of work. I was supposed to have just one last day shift before I was done house-parenting at New Hope, a group home for girls, but I told Natalie I would cover her overnight. I didn't mind since the girls would be sleeping most, if not all, of the time I was there. It was just one more shift to cash in on before I left. I felt gone already. I was getting married soon, and the weight of planning and life-altering decisions was heavy.

The next song on the radio was Green Day's "Time of Your Life." I don't usually listen to the radio. I like to work a little harder to discover my own music. But that day the idea of flipping through my CDs to find the perfect obscure soundtrack for this ride to work seemed like so much, well, work.

I started to sing along, "So take the photographs and still frames in your mind...I hope you had the time of your life!" Bleh! I flipped off the power and yanked myself out of autopilot mode. *No, Alex, tonight's soundtrack is not a generic high-school graduation song.* I drove the rest of the way in silence.

I was early. The girls were still finishing their Bible lesson. I walked up to the house and lingered for a second out in the desert summer air. It was warm and dry—it's always dry in Tucson—and it was so clear I could see every tiny star. Five years earlier, on a night like this I would have been out on the high-school football field with Joe, smoking cigarettes and talking about going to college. Tonight, I was thinking about marrying Jeff.

The girls were curled up on the couches with their Bibles. Jenny saw me and opened the door to let me in, "Hi, Miss Alex." They had to call me "Miss," even though it made me feel like an imposter—like a kid trying to get into an R-rated movie. Still, I needed all the respect and distinction I could get. I was not that much older than them, and at 5'3" my stature doesn't exactly demand authority.

"Hey," I said, smiling at the rest of them before sneaking back to the office to put my stuff away and get settled. I took a deep breath alone in the tiny office. There were all of the kitchen knives that we kept locked up, the lockers that held the only possessions the girls were allowed to have, and the profile boards that had each intake picture and various important notes: Sara—run threat, Katie—cutter, Lindsey—bulimic.

Looking at the angry and pinched faces in those photos, I remembered three years ago when I was nineteen and began working at New Hope. At the

time, I had envisioned a modern *Sound of Music* scenario—only instead of waltzing into the program wearing a long flowing skirt and singing about raindrops and kittens, I would be the cool older sister type wearing Chuck Taylors and humming the Ramones. Surely the delinquent teens would immediately drop their hypodermic needles and follow my lead like the Pied Piper. I had conjured up images of inspiration like Michelle Pfeiffer, in her role as the teacher who inspired urban students in *Dangerous Minds*, knowing that I too had the energy and goodwill to turn gang members and meth addicts into poets and congresswomen.

Reality was grittier and significantly more irritating. My first day I learned how to hotwire a car from a fourteen-year-old. On my tour of the office, I saw a photo of one girl with two little boys. "Oh, her little brothers?" I asked. No, her kids.

Days consisted of constant arguments over how to properly make a bed and battles of the will over consumption of vegetables. Nights

were like a Nancy Drew novel. Who put eggs in the washing machine? Who was playing naked "truth or dare" in the dorm rooms? Who drew lewd stick figure artwork on the back page of the Bible? Which girl or girls had a motive? It was like a game of Clue with each new crime. The houseparents gathered in the office and submitted their theories, "Rachel... snorting lines of Sweet'n Low...on the toilet lid..."

They were creative. I was exhausted.

Back in the living room, Hillary, who would take my place as the head houseparent, was finishing up a devotion. I slid into a chair in the back of the room outside of the circle, and I listened. Hillary looked like another teenager next to the rest of the girls, her hair tied up in a ponytail and her feet on the couch, her arms propped on her knees. She looked half her age, and she knew it. The girls had teased her when the guy who donated dairy products to the home flirted with her. She insisted he was just being friendly and threatened to mark down their behavior scores, but she also tossed her hair a little more that day. Even though she was closer to my mom's age than to mine, we had become close over the past three years. I would really miss her.

The lamps emitted a soft glow and the couches were decorated with the crochet projects the girls

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had taken up to replace their previous “recreational” activities. For me, too, this place had become a sort of home, but now that I was so close to leaving, I was an outsider.

Amelia, normally armed with sarcasm and bleached hair, had helped Hillary plan the devotion. When she first entered the program Amelia was angry and coked out. One night she asked me if she could stay up after the other girls had gone to bed so she could talk with me. We sat in this same living room and she told me about her friend’s terminal illness. Frustrated and desperate she asked me why bad things happen to good people. I looked her in the eyes, both of us tearing up, and confessed I didn’t know. She hugged me for the first time and sobbed into my shoulder. “Thank you,” she said. Now, hearing her recite a psalm, I began to recognize the power that was at work here.

I looked around the circle. The girls were quiet and listening, commenting only here and there to contribute to the discussion or read a passage. There was Sara, a recovering meth addict who had come straight from juvie. Lindsey, also a meth addict, came from Orange County and drove a nicer car than any of the houseparents. Their worlds had collided, but now they sat comfortably next to each other on the couch. Taryn, with a big mouth and even bigger hair, was following along in her Bible and smiling at her discovery.

I counted twelve, yes twelve, girls who, for a moment, were enjoying learning about love. I sat looking at them—girls who had rotten teeth from cocaine, who had domestic violence records, who had slept with more men than there were in my graduating class—and I knew that I was in the presence of something pure. Had one of them smuggled in a roofie and laced my drink? This bittersweet feeling wasn’t the drained irritation I had been recently used to. It was beautiful; and it was the right time to leave.

Hillary caught me off guard, asking, “Alex, will you pray for us?” There I was exposed. I had prayed in

front of the girls more than a thousand times in the years I’d been at New Hope. I didn’t expect this time to be any different.

“God,” I began. “I need to thank you...” The last syllable was high-pitched and creaky. I hesitated, hoping that none of them would notice, but my pause was too long and my true feelings were laid out. They knew I was about to cry. I heard a few whispers, and I forced myself to go on.

“God, thank you for allowing me to be any kind of instrument in the lives of these girls and for allowing them to be one in mine.” There was no stopping the flood of tears down my face now.

“Please be present in their lives and help me to remember how I feel tonight to be with them.” I finished, humbled and messy, seizing the tissue box from the coffee table to attempt damage control and looking up to see that the other thirteen faces in the room were also red and tear-streaked.

“Huuah!” The wind was nearly knocked out of me as I was tackled from the side by a hug. The rest of them jumped in with embraces and “I love yous.” Krista pleaded with me not to leave and insisted that I was abandoning them for a man. Danielle and Shannon ripped off my shoes declaring that if I wanted to leave, I’d have to find them first. Amelia said that if she had to be in rehab she was glad she was here with me. It was the best compliment I’d ever gotten.

I felt, looking at these girls who now had full pink faces instead of the wan drug-induced tinge from before, the pride of a mother. Three years had gone by with hundreds of girls coming in and out of these doors. Three years of long talks, withdrawal sicknesses, refereed arguments, 911 calls, and tutorials on toilet cleaning. I thanked God again in my head as one of the biggest challenges of my life melted into one of my greatest joys and my new plan fit into a greater one.

I hugged each of them, returned their “I love yous,” and tearfully smiled. “Now go to bed!” ■

## AWAKENING

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When Duke called a timeout late in the game, my man-of-few-words brother said to me, “I don’t know if I’ll ever get out of this hospital. I’m not sure I can beat this cancer.”

Bruce looked at his toes peeking out from beneath the white blanket. He didn’t look at me. I looked at his toes too. Giving him a hug or shedding tears wasn’t part of the family repertoire. I couldn’t say I thought everything was going to be okay. That would have been lying.

Basketball came back from commercial. Duke’s timeout was over and the game resumed. Bruce’s gaze returned to the game. I followed his lead. We spent the next two days together, but we spoke no more about his situation. Neither of us knew how. Then I flew back to California to resume my studies. Even if the dream was not predictive, even if my brother wasn’t going to turn into a skeleton, I was grateful for the little bit of connection we’d had.

Three months later, I got a call one morning from my sister-in-law. Bruce was battling a serious blood infection, and it didn’t look good. One by one his organs were shutting down. I thanked her for calling, hung up the phone, and waited. That evening my brother Paul called. Bruce had died.

I got off the phone and broke down. I cried for his loss. I cried for our lack of connection. I cried because there would be no future together. Yet I was also thankful. Thankful I had been enrolled that semester in a class on dream interpretation. Thankful I had had a dream that told me to take my brother’s cancer seriously. Thankful for a wonderful time watching basketball together in a hospital room and an awkward attempt at a conversation neither of us knew how to have.

I’m still not sure what I think about dream interpretation. I remain cautious about making connections between my dreams and reality. Nevertheless, I am grateful for that dream. It woke me up so I could have time with my brother. ■